

The Mystical Explanation of the Canticle of Canticles



by Saint Francis de Sales

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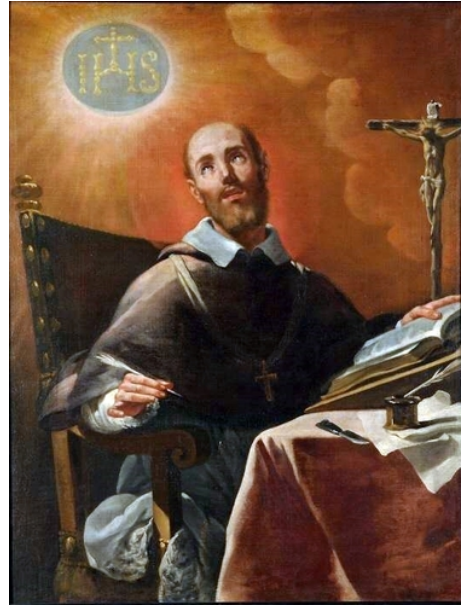


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Introductory

Foreword

In a letter written some fifteen years after the death of Saint Francis de Sales, Saint Jane Frances de Chantal tells us how, in looking over the long-forgotten contents of an old disused box, many writings of the Saint were found, and among them an explanation of the Canticle of Canticles set out in the form of a meditation. She adds that she had never heard the Holy Founder speak of this treatise, but that the then Superioress of the Community declared that he had often preached on the subject to which it referred, in the early days of the Visitation.



We are thus led to see how at an early period the thoughts which ultimately found expression in the great treatise on the Love of God were already taking shape in the Saint's mind; and how, in the midst of many labours demanding the full exercise of that practical sense, which was so distinctive a quality of his character, he was living habitually in a higher region of very close union with God. The insight which a perusal of the "Mystical Explanation" gives us into the history of his spiritual development, is at the same time an incentive to all those who have to pass a life of activity in God's service, to devote themselves without ceasing to loving thought of Divine things; to maintain themselves in the midst of their labour closely united to God; and to cultivate the interior spirit no less, but far more, than the

manifestations of external zeal. It is a lesson that we all need at the present day, in the hurry and pressure of so many urgent duties.

The second part of the volume before us gives us the detailed and finished portrait of the Saint's life, told, in her own simple and transparently truthful words, by her whom God had chosen to be the principal instrument in that which was probably the most enduring work entrusted to Saint Francis de Sales, namely, the foundation of the Religious Institute of the Visitation. Almost day by day we are carried in the footsteps of the Saint through every period of his life. We see him as he appeared to the eyes of Saint Jane Frances, not in any fancy portraiture such as distance conveys to later biographers, but as he was in the sight of those who lived in close intimacy with him. It is a picture full of consolation and encouragement, destined by Divine Providence to make us understand and love the Saint more than any other account of his life could do, and thereby to draw us to greater thankfulness to God for having given us an example so sweet to contemplate, and so deserving of our imitation.

This new volume of the Library of Saint Francis de Sales will bring consolation to many souls, not only on account of the valuable teaching it contains, but because it is a proof that the special work which God raised up the late Father Benedict Mackey to undertake, and to which he gave so much care and devotion, has not ceased with his death. To Father Benedict the Church is indebted for a fuller and more complete knowledge of the life and writings of Saint Francis. May that gentle Saint reward him now for all his labours.

*- Cardinal Francis Alphonsus Bourne
Archdiocese of Westminster, England
Feast of Saint John before the Latin Gate, 1908*

Notice

My dear Reader,

I know well that to ensure your esteem for this little work which I present to you, it is sufficient for you. to know that its author is the Blessed Francis of Sales: such a holy, saintly, and enlightened mind could not speak on such a subject but what was holy and worth hearing.

I do not think I am going against his wishes in publishing it, for although for a long time he kept it to himself, as it was one of the first attempts of his pen, it is nevertheless quite conceivable that, if death had not prevented the plan he had formed of giving more of his writings to the public, not less useful than those now circulating everywhere with such high approbation and good results, his incomparable charity would have induced him to give it to you himself, but no doubt in a more perfect and elaborate form. However, here it is, exactly as it left his hands, and as it was found after his death. The persons with whom he left it, either kept it for their own consolation, or, for some other good reason, did not think fit to publish it sooner. The Latin text has been added in the margin to make it more clear by comparing one with another. [this has not been done by Canon Mackey in the translation - *ed.*] Souls that are advanced and experienced in the interior life will find, as I hope, satisfaction from it. But I beg you, dear reader, if you desire to profit by it, to read it with as reverent a mind as the holiness of the subject demands.

- *The Publisher, 1643*

Preface

There are two sorts of unions of the soul with God in this world: the first by grace, which is made in Baptism, or by means of Penance; the second by devotion, and this is made by means of spiritual exercises. The one makes us innocent and the other spiritual. Solomon, considering himself to have given sufficient instruction on the first sort of union in his other books, only teaches the second in the Canticles, in which he supposes the spouse, that is, the devout soul, to be already married to her Divine Beloved, and represents their holy and chaste married loves, practised by mental prayer, which is simply the consideration of God and Divine things.

Under this name of consideration are comprised four different acts of the understanding; viz. thought, study, meditation, and contemplation. We think of things without aim or intention, we study them to become more learned, we meditate on them in order to love them, and we contemplate them to enjoy them. Some will look at a portrait simply in order to see the colours and lines, without other aim; others in order to learn and imitate the art; others in order to love the person represented, as princes do their spouses, whom very often they only see in a picture; others because they already love the person represented, and take pleasure in regarding his or her portrait. The first of these acts is without aim, the second profits the understanding, the third and fourth profit the will, the one inflaming it, the other delighting it. These two last form the mystical subject of the Canticles, but between them we may rightly place petition (*la demande*), and then the three correspond to the theological virtues.

Meditation is founded on faith, considering what we believe in order to love it; petition on hope, asking what we hope for in order to obtain it; contemplation on charity, contemplating what we love in order to rejoice in it.

Still, the subject of this book does not take in petition, nor the two affective considerations alone, nor even devotion, which devotion is neither meditation nor contemplation, but their effect: for it is nothing but a general virtue contrary to spiritual slothfulness, making us prompt in the service of God: in such sort that where faith is we are by devotion made more prompt to believe; where hope is we are made more prompt to desire what God promises, and by charity to love what God commands, by temperance to abstain, by fortitude to endure; and so of the rest: devotion adds to the particular promptitudes which habits give, a general and common one, produced by meditation and contemplation, as a pilgrim becomes more heartened by taking food.

Solomon's end in this book is devotion, but his subject is mental prayer, taking the word for meditation and contemplation, not for thought, nor for study, nor for petition, nor for devotion, nor even for the consolation and pleasure which is had in prayer, and which, not being always had therein, is distinguished from it; yea, it often happens that this pleasure, while absent from the prayer of the good, is found in that of great sinners: but our pilgrim, if in good plight, after having taken his refreshment, whether with or without relish, returns ever with more promptness to his journey.

Now, if mental prayer is distinguished from spiritual pleasure, as the cause from the effect, still more is it distinguished from spiritual joyfulness, which is produced by the multitude of delights. The courtier who has received from his prince many favours, acquires a habit by which he serves him not only with promptness, but with joy: so we ought always to serve God promptly, but we only serve Him with joy when we have many spiritual delights springing from mental prayer. The pilgrim will be more disposed for his journey if he has eaten; but if he has eaten with relish and

appetite, he will be not only disposed but at the same time blithe and joyous.

We have also to say that possibility, facility, promptness, and joyfulness in an action are different things. To bring to life again a dead child is not within the ability of the mother; to cure him when he is extremely ill is a possible thing but not an easy one; to apply the cautery to his wound by order of the doctor is a thing possible and easy to be done, but not with promptness; on the contrary, it is done with reluctance and dread: the washing of his clothes is done easily, possibly, promptly, but not joyously; while to receive him and welcome him into her arms after he is cured is done possibly, easily, promptly, and joyously.

So the sinner has not of himself the possibility of serving God with merit; as soon as he is in grace he has the possibility together with reluctance and difficulty; having persevered, he serves Him easily; after he has become devout, he serves Him promptly; if he is a contemplative, he serves Him joyously; grace giving the possibility, charity the facility, mental prayer the promptness and devotion, the multitude of delights joyousness.

Above all these acts are ecstasy and rapture: for when in prayer, meditating and contemplating, man so attaches himself to the object that he goes out of himself, loses the use of his senses, and remains absorbed and drawn out of himself; this estrangement of the understanding is called rapture on the part of the object which rapt the soul, and on the part of the power which is absorbed and swallowed up is called ecstasy, the furthest effect of mental prayer here below.

In a word, mental prayer is the subject of the Canticles; but it is necessary to know the above-mentioned things for the

proper understanding of the terms, even when they only seem to be literal: though it is very rarely they are literal, and it is very hard to recognize these in the Canticles; whereas, on the contrary, the mystical terms are there in abundance, and in great variety. For example we never find devotion, relish, joyfulness, rapture, ecstasy, and such like things, but at every step, sleep, dreams, inebriation, languishing, fainting, and the like. Even the nature and attributes of God or of the soul are not named therein, but instead of all this, eyes, ears, teeth, lips, necks, garments, gardens, ointments, and a thousand like things; which have caused confusion in the explanations, by reason of the liberty which each commentator has taken to bring these words to his sense; and, which is worse, by reason of the insupportable license which the same commentator has taken of understanding in one same page the same word in different manners and for different things.

But we have undertaken nothing except in imitation of the best authors, or without apparent agreement between the signifying term and the thing signified: and having once given a signification to a term, we have never changed it afterwards. Kisses will always signify spiritual consolations; embraces, union with God; sweet-tasting meats, spiritual relish; languishings and faintings, happiness and joys; sleeps and inebrieties, raptures and ecstasies. In the spouse, when exterior power is treated of, the neck will signify strength to execute; when interior power, it will signify the irascible part, and will never change its meaning. In the Beloved, the head will signify charity. The scene of the Canticles, Jerusalem, will ever be the militant Church; the Beloved will always be God, either uncreated or incarnate; the spouse, the soul; the choir of women, worldly conversations.

In fine, mental prayer is the mystic subject of the Canticles: but what things would Solomon, or rather the Holy Spirit, say of it? He would show us by how many degrees a soul being in mental prayer can rise to the higher consideration of God, and with what remedies it can strengthen itself against many obstacles: whence this division may be made.

There are five principal obstacles in prayer, five principal remedies, and five degrees of it: but the sixth scene represents a soul which having overcome all the obstacles has no longer need of remedies; and to each of the five other scenes is given or laid down an obstacle, a remedy, and a degree.

In the first, the remembrance of past pleasures of the senses is the obstacle, the remedy is the desire of spiritual things, and the asking them from God. The first degree is to consider God in corporeal things.

In the second, the obstacle is the distraction of the imaginative part by phantasies and sensible appearances; the remedy is attention to inspirations; the degree, the considering God in spiritual things.

In the third, the obstacle is human praises; the remedy is to relish Divine; the degree is the consideration which the soul makes of God in itself.

In the fourth, the obstacle is the fatigue of the body and the sensible part; the remedy is spiritual conferences and conversations; the degree is to meditate on God, not in Himself, but in His humanity.

In the fifth, the obstacle is human respects; the remedy is solitude; the degree, the consideration of God in Himself and as God.

THE CANTICLE OF CANTICLES - AN ECLOGUE OF SOLOMON'S MYSTICALLY EXPLAINED



Argument

This book treats of the way to arrive at a perfect form of mental prayer; it points out the obstacles thereto, the remedies for these obstacles, and by how many degrees we can arrive thereat. The scene is Jerusalem, the militant Church.

Discourse I

First Hindrance: The Remembrance of Sensible Pleasures

He who purposes never more to offend God meets with many occasions of sin presented by the devil. He who resolves to desire no other consolation save in God, meets with the world, which offers to him new temporal pleasures: and it is a great hindrance to receiving the divine consolations to be unable to quit and give up former society, conversations, and recreations.

Therefore the spouse, that is, the soul already in grace, wishing to enter upon the spiritual life in the kisses of her divine Beloved, which are spiritual consolations, has great difficulty in detaching herself from the company of her companions, old conversations which offer her wine and perfumes, that is, temporal pleasures: wherefore the soul languishing on account of the absence of her Beloved, and desiring to be united to Him by prayer, her companions seek to cheer her with wines and perfumes, bringing to her memory pleasures passed, in spite of which she begs:

Let him kiss me with the kiss of his mouth.

Remedy for the First Obstacle: The Soul Desires and Demands Spiritual Goods

1st. She considers that earthly goods and pleasures by the side of divine are nothing but vanity.

2nd. That God is sweet and desirable in Himself.

3rd. That many holy souls have led the way, having found no pleasure save in God.

4th. She begs God to take from her all earthly affections.

And as to the first she says:

For thy breasts are better than wine, smelling sweet of the best ointments.

As to the second she says:

Thy name is as oil poured out.

As to the third:

Therefore young maidens have loved thee.

And as to the fourth:

Draw me; we will run after thee to the odour of thy ointments.

And then immediately, moved with a great confidence of obtaining what she asks, as if it were already gained she adds:

The King hath brought me into his store rooms; we will be glad and rejoice in thee, remembering thy breasts more than wine: the righteous have loved thee.

But scruples arise, from the memory of past sins; whence she says:

I am black (but the integrity of her present conscience makes her add) but I am beautiful, ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Cedar, as the curtains of Solomon.

The presence of the elements of sin in concupiscence is a species of disgrace, and yet they cannot be made a reproach to her or imputed to her as sin:

Do not consider me that I am brown,

Because my sun has willed to leave me in this state of strife:

Because the sun hath altered my colour.

And this has not happened through my fault, but through that of the first children of human nature my mother:

The sons of my mother have fought against me.

It was by their sins that I was laid under the necessity of keeping such careful guard over myself, as if I had to keep a vineyard:

They have made me the keeper in the vineyards,

against the attacks of concupiscence: and all this, alas! not by my own actual fault, but by that of another, whence I can say:

It is not my vineyard that I have kept.

Yet still let confidence return to me, and let me begin to seek my Beloved, where He is more easily found, by prayer:

Show me, thou whom my soul loveth, where thou feedest, where thou liest in the mid-day, lest I begin to wander after the flocks of thy companions:

that is, after creatures. Teach me where I may find Thee in prayer with Thy lights and consolations, not staying at the creature.

First Degree of Prayer: Consideration of God in Corporeal Things

Dost thou now see this sun, my spouse, these stars, this sky, this earth, these rocks? they are so many ways and roads to find Me; they did not make themselves; they are not without some principle which made them, and which is their last end, which preserves them, which guards them. And who is this principle and this end? It is God: the mothers of all things are the ideas which are in Me, in My power and goodness. The lambs, as soon as the gate of the sheepfold is open, run straight to their mothers; so man, seeing creatures, ascends little by little to God; it is a means of finding Me:

If thou know not thyself, fairest among women (because thou art as yet a beginner), go forth (from the remembrance of past pleasures) and follow after the steps of the flocks.

Seek My path in all creatures; let thyself be guided and led whither they of themselves return, and thou shalt find that they will go and repose in the pastures of their first shepherd:

And feed thy kids beside the tents of the shepherds.

Thou shalt be conducted to three feeders and one shepherd, to three creating ones and one creator. All sensible creatures will lead thee thither, and the most noble the best. Above all will human nature be profitable to thee in this way in thy first meditations. Thou shalt see the supernatural goods which are therein, as that it is the habitation of God, His throne, and, as it were, His chariot, whence it can say to Him:

To my company of horsemen, in Pharaoh's chariots, have I likened thee, my love.

Thou shalt see in it natural goods; for it is as beautiful in itself as if it had all the ornaments in the world:

Thy cheeks are beautiful as the turtle dove's, thy neck as jewels.

Thou shalt see accidental goods, such as this, that all the world has been made for thy use, ornament, and service:

We will make thee chains of gold inlaid with silver.

Which are benefits so great that the soul in meditating upon them is inflamed with love, and is constrained to cry out: As I can do no more, at least I will love Thee, my love! and will myself be Thy royal chamber, which I will perfume with spikenard; that is, I will fill myself with love:

While my King was at his repose, my spikenard sent forth the odour thereof.

And further, I will unite myself so closely with Him, that I shall carry Him as a nosegay within my bosom:

A bundle of myrrh is my beloved to me, he shall abide between my breasts.

He shall ever be my dear balm, and my greatest treasure:

A cluster of Cyprus [i.e., of Cyprian grapes -*tr.*] is my love to me in the vineyards of Engaddi.

These affections make the Beloved love and praise the soul, saying:

Behold thou art fair, my love, behold thou art fair, thy eyes are as those of doves.

As for the soul, which acknowledges that all its light depends on its sun, which is God, it confesses that He alone is good by essence:

Behold thou art fair, my beloved, and comely; (and thou so embellishest our essence when thou wilt, that even) our bed (which is our body) is flourishing.

Behold our bed flourishing, and even this world our habitation.

The beams of our houses are of cedar, our rafters of cypress trees.

Therefore, what wonder is it if:

I am the flower of the field and the lily of the valleys.

The Beloved, acknowledging this, declares that many souls are of a very different quality, by the malice of their wills; for they are like thorns:

As a lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.

Beloved praises, which the soul neither accepts nor rejects, but, captivated with her Beloved, she returns to consider Him amid the same sensible things, not now meditating on Him to love Him, but contemplating Him to delight in Him, praising Him to the highest amid all created things:

As the apple tree among the trees of the woods, so is my beloved among the sons.

Wherefore having found a good so eminent above every other, she rests in it, seeking no more:

I sat down under his shadow whom I desired:

And in this spiritual repose is tasted the sweetness of devotion:

And his fruit was sweet to my palate.

So sweet that it produces certain holy distractions and madnesses in my soul, as if it was inebriated with love; whence it cries out:

He brought me into the cellar of wine, he spread the standard of his charity over me.

But particularly by the frequent communication of them, they produce the habit of spiritual joyfulness, in which sweetly languishing she feels herself faint away and fall; wherefore she says:

Stay me up with flowers, compass me about with apples: because I languish with love.

What further? The soul, feeling the rapture, mystically signified by sleep, coming over it, and not wishing to sleep anywhere but in the arms of her Beloved, says:

His left hand is under my head, and his right hand shall embrace me.

Then God takes care that low things do not hinder this divine consolation, wherefore He says to the choir of women:

I adjure you, ye daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes and the harts of the fields, that you stir not up, nor make the

beloved to awake till she please.

Then the soul begins to prove and know that there is no sweetness equal to that which is found in mental prayer.

Discourse II

Second Hindrance: The Distraction of the Imagination

The better known a road is to us, the more we frequent it; the more people we know therein, the more willingly also we journey thereby and the more easily: but still by such roads we are more slow in arriving at our journey's end, because, having many acquaintance, here we speak to one, there to another, here we enter into somebody's shop, there we stay to talk with a friend. For the consideration of God no track is more beaten, known, or familiar than that of corporeal things, amid which we live; no way is more easy in itself, but also no way has more distractions. When I meditate on God in the angel, who is an invisible thing, and one in no way familiar to me, it produces in me but few fancies and distractions: but if I consider God in man, my imagination descends from the universal to the particular, and under the name of man represents to me Peter, Paul, or somebody doing with me this or that thing. Hence while in this way which is so familiar to us we stop at all the shops of our acquaintance, we arrive at our journey's end either late or never.

In the same way as the multitude of dreams does not allow us to sleep peacefully, but keeps us almost awake while sleeping; so prayer, when it has arrived at the sleep of ecstasy, which is as it were its summit, may be itself called sleep; but when it is interrupted by distractions of the fancy, it is a sleep full of dreams; and then our Beloved speaks to us and comes to us, not to abide and repose with us; but He comes by leaps and starts:

The voice of my beloved, behold he cometh leaping
upon the mountains, skipping over the hills.

He seems sometimes to approach, sometimes to flee:

My beloved is like a roe or a young hart.

Now He shows Himself, now He hides Himself:

Behold he standeth behind our wall.

And though He seemeth to make Himself seen:

Looking through the windows.

Yet as our sight of Him is neither very clear nor very
unbroken, it may be said that the windows have bars, and
that He is:

Looking through the lattices.

Remedy for the Second Impediment: Attention to Inspirations

Now we must not be beyond measure distressed in these
distractions; for they are attached to our nature, and we
cannot be blamed for them unless they happen through our
fault. Still we must use remedies, which are to often recollect
ourselves, and to incline our ear to hear inspirations:

Behold my beloved speaketh to me: Arise, make haste,
my love, my dove, my beautiful one, and come.

And further. He makes her remember the innocence at which
she may piously believe she has arrived, not feeling herself
burdened with any mortal sin. how sad was the winter of sin:

For winter is now past, the rain is over and gone.

He rejoices that the flowers of devotion begin to spring and grow:

The flowers have appeared in our land.

That she has begun to cut off evil superfluities:

The time of pruning is come:

That, as a turtle-dove she makes her plaining and her soft murmuring in her prayer:

The voice of the turtle is heard in our land.

But further He rejoices that she has already produced flowers of good works and perfumes of good example:

The fig-tree hath put forth her green figs: the vines in flower yield their sweet smell.

He exhorts her besides this still to go forward; and of a beginner to become a proficient, saying to her:

Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and come.

And because in the beginnings it seems to the soul, that she is amid many difficulties, as amid rocks and thorns:

My dove in the clefts of the rock, in the hollow places of the wall.

Therefore He assures her that still she ceases not to be very agreeable to Him:

Shew me thy face, let thy voice sound in my ears: for thy voice is sweet and thy face comely.

This discourse is so sweet that it should drive away all other thoughts: yet if these thoughts return, she will say, as it were in a dream:

Catch us the little foxes that destroy the vines: for our vineyard hath flourished.

And re-uniting herself with her object, she will say:

My beloved to me and I to him, who feedeth among the lilies, as long as the day lasts and till the shadows fall. Return: be like, my beloved, to a roe or a young hart upon the mountains of Bether.

And thus will she surmount this second impediment.

Second Degree: The Soul Considers God in Spiritual Things Outside Itself

This way of considerations is less known, but is also less subject to distractions. In the preceding degree it seems as if one finds not God, although one has found Him; here, however, we at once recognize that we have found Him:

In my bed (that is, in human bodies which are the beds of souls) by night I sought him whom my soul loveth: I sought him and found him not. I will rise and will go about the city: (of this world).

And running through sometimes earthly sometimes heavenly bodies, I have sought Him, and have not found Him; at least distractions have been so great that I scarcely seem to myself to have met Him:

In the streets and in the broad ways I will seek him whom my soul loveth: I sought him, and I found him not.

My happiness has led me to remember the angels who are, as it were, the sentinels of the world:

The watchmen who keep the city found me.

And I resolved to try whether I should find in them the consideration of God more settled:

Have you seen him, whom my soul loveth?

Immediately above the angelic nature I have found the divine:

When I had a little passed by them, I found him whom my soul loveth:

And this without sensible distractions, so that it seems that I shall never lose Him:

I held him, and I will not let him go.

Till I enter into heavenly glory, the true home of human nature my mother, and into her chamber, that is, the thrones of the angels which are prepared for me: then to this mysterious seeing will succeed a clear vision:

Till I bring him (or rather, till He bring me) into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her that bore me.

Holy consideration of God in spiritual things! - which, as of its nature it does not breed fancies of the imagination, so it will not breed dreams. The consideration which belongs to the first degree is more interrupted, this is more stable and more exalted. Hence it produces all its effects with more excellence, namely, a livelier love and more spiritual

joyousness: to which God adding His grace forbids with a more particular sollicitude that she should be awakened:

I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, by the roses and the harts of the fields, that you stir not up nor awake the beloved till she please.

Discourse III

Third Impediment: Human Praises

The soul, advancing from step to step in holy prayer, becomes so resplendent that it is impossible she should not be admired, and that even the world, seeing her in the midst of the desert, solicited by so many sins, walking faithfully, and resembling a column of odoriferous perfume rising towards the sky, should not exclaim:

Who is she that goeth up by the desert, as a pillar of smoke, of aromatical spices, of myrrh, and frankincense, and of all the powders of the perfumer?

But this applause is a hidden and sweetened poison, which very often causes the most saintly and devout to lose their justice and their devotion.

Remedy for the Third Impediment: To Refer All Praises to God

Let him whosoever hears his own praises turn towards those of God: let him persuade the praiser not to wish to praise a thing of so little worth; but to draw up the praises of God out of our lowness and littleness. And if he cannot so soon fix his gaze on the Divinity, let him at least praise Jesus Christ, man, our true Solomon, and that principally in three things, His flesh. His cross. His glory, saying: Behold how worthy is His flesh, the bed of His Divinity and of His soul, surrounded by more than sixty valiant soldiers, who defend it against every one who at night could cause it fear: that flesh which is not inclined to sin like ours, but by the hypostatic union,

and by the empire it holds over the angels, is altogether perfect and impeccable:

Behold three-score valiant ones of the most valiant of Israel, surrounded the bed of Solomon; all holding swords and most expert in war: every man's sword upon his thigh, because of fears in the night.

As for the Cross, how holy is it! It is of wood, but of wood of Libanus, that is, incorruptible:

King Solomon hath made him a litter of the wood of Libanus:

Justice and mercy are the two columns which uphold this cross:

The pillars thereof he made of silver, the seat of gold,

Forasmuch as all is done to conduct souls to glory:

The going up of purple:

For He conducts us to glory only by His Blood, and all this for the souls of the Church, of whom it is said:

The midst he covered with charity for the daughters of Jerusalem.

Whence there follows for this Lord the crown of the glory of His resurrection and ascension, which should carry away the whole world in His praise:

Go forth, ye daughters of Sion, and see King Solomon in the diadem, wherewith his mother crowned him in the day of his espousals, and in the day of the joy of his heart.

Third Degree: The Soul Considers God in Herself

The soul therefore, refusing the praises of herself in those of God, takes care to adorn herself in all her parts to please Him whom she considers to be alone worthy of all praises. Now her mystical parts are the eyes, that is, the intentions which move them; the hair, that is, her affections - love, hatred, desire, and others - which, like the hair, are neither good nor bad except in so far as they are employed in good or in evil; the teeth, that is, the senses, which chew all the meats that are to enter into the stomach of the understanding; the lips and the speech, that is, the thoughts, which like interior words produce inaudible discourses; the cheeks are the two reasonable powers, which are the understanding and the will; the neck the irascible powers, which drive off and repel impediments; the breasts are the two actions of the concupiscible powers, following good, avoiding evil.

All this has to be adorned and embellished, in order that God may love the soul, and may be able to say:

How beautiful art thou, my love, how beautiful art thou!

The intentions must be simple, pure and interior, so that it may not be possible to say the one looks outward, the other inward, and that they are crooked and look different ways:

Thy eyes are doves' eyes, besides what is hid within.

The affections should not be scattered, but gathered together and united like a flock under the crook of the sovereign shepherd:

Thy hair is as flocks of goats, which come from Mount Galaad.

The senses should be kept as it were imprisoned, like the teeth behind the lips, like sheep newly washed, and their twins, that is, the perceptive and the appetitive faculties, must be under control and regulated:

Thy teeth as flocks of sheep that are shorn, which come up from the washing, all with twins, and there is none barren among them.

The thoughts ought to be so well regulated that all the conceptions may be dyed in the blood of the Saviour, and the words and discourses full of sweetness and profit for our neighbour:

Thy lips are as a scarlet lace: and thy speech sweet.

The understanding and the will must show that they know what is right, and intend to do it: and, as in a cut pomegranate, all that is there will be displayed, nothing will therein appear ugly and disagreeable; and these two powers will ever be humble and submissive:

Thy cheeks are as a piece of a pomegranate, besides that which lieth hid within.

The irascible part shall be so valiant against temptations that one will be able to say:

Thy neck is as the tower of David, which is built with bulwarks: a thousand bucklers hang upon it, all the armour of valiant men.

And as to the concupiscible part, it shall have its desire of good and its avoidance of evil so simple that it may be said:

Thy two breasts like two young roes that are twins,
which feed among the lilies.

Lastly, the Beloved, Who, since His ascension has gone to
the mountain of myrrh and the hill of incense in heaven, on
the right hand of the Father, as He had foretold:

Till the day break and the shadows retire, I will go to the
mountain of myrrh, and to the hill of frankincense.

Will praise the soul, saying:

Thou art all fair, O my love, and there is not a spot in
thee.

And He will invite her to pass to the militant and triumphant
Jerusalem, saying:

Come from Libanus, my spouse, come from Libanus,
come:

And will promise the crowns and thrones of which the
demons were deprived:

Thou shalt be crowned from the top of Amana, from the
top of Sanir and Hermon, from the dens of the lions, from
the mountains of the leopards.

All the ornaments are agreeable to God, but especially
simplicity and purity of intention, which ought to be so great
that all our ends may be reduced to one end, all our
intentions to one intention, all our desires to a desire of
serving and loving God, so that there may be no longer but
one eye:

Thou hast wounded my heart, my sister, my spouse,
thou hast wounded my heart with one of thy eyes, and

with one hair of thy neck.

And that there may be no longer but one hair, whence it follows:

And with one hair of thy neck.

The intention and the desire being well directed, the breasts of concupiscence will be well regulated:

How beautiful are thy breasts, my sister, my spouse! Thy breasts are more beautiful than wine,

Her example will be of good odour:

And the sweet smell of thy ointments above all aromatical spices.

Her thoughts and words will be very devout and sweet:

Thy lips, my spouse, are as a dropping honeycomb, honey and milk are under thy tongue;

Her actions will be of most excellent fragrance:

And the smell of thy garments as the smell of frankincense.

Let us say thus: the actions which proceed from a soul are interior or exterior. The exterior are done by the command of the interior; and as for the interior, they must be locked up in God, and the world cannot see them; that is why He says:

My sister, my spouse is a garden enclosed, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up.

And as for the exterior, they are to be as a lovely paradise:

Thy plants are a paradise of pomegranates with the fruits of the orchard. Cyprus with spikenard, spikenard and saffron, sweet cane and cinnamon, with all the trees of Libanus, myrrh and aloes with all the chief perfumes.

In a word, the soul is a fountain of good works, which spring up towards heaven with impetuosity, like to that of the waters which come from Libanus:

The fountain of gardens: the well of living waters, which run with a strong stream from Libanus.

But in all this two things are required on the part of God; that He should drive away the north wind of temptations, and send the south wind of His preventing grace, saying:

Flee, north wind, and come, south wind, blow through my garden, and let the aromatical spices thereof flow.

On the part of the soul it is required that she should accept this grace and co-operate, saying:

Let my beloved come into his garden, and eat of the fruit of his apple-trees.

Thus, after the myrrh of repentance, God will draw the soul by means of holy exercises to the aromatic perfumes of prayer, with the honey, the milk, the wine, of meditation, of love, and of contemplation: but such contemplation that it shall produce delights, joys and ecstasies, which shall not only quench thirst, but shall inebriate; and Our Lord will be able to say:

I am come into my garden, my sister, my spouse; I have gathered my myrrh with my aromatical spices: I have eaten the honeycomb with my honey, I have drunk my

wine with my milk: eat, friends, and drink, and be
inebriated, my dearly beloved.

Discourse IV

Fourth Impediment: Bodily Labour

The soul which arrives at the degrees described very often finds itself with a body tired and worn, whence it happens that if God invites her to new considerations and higher degrees she is in perplexity: she would greatly like to go further, but the labour terrifies her; and if the Beloved call her again, she rises to go to prayer, but still with a resistance of the sensible part which deprives her of pleasure, and causes that she can scarcely think that God is with her; and as happens to those who are extremely tired, she falls asleep while watching:

I sleep, and my heart watcheth:

Then turning herself towards her Beloved Who is knocking at her heart:

The voice of my beloved knocking.

And excites her to open to Him, and to recommence her prayer:

Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled:

And with a fourth degree of prayer meditate a little on My Passion. Thou wilt find that I have My head full of the heavenly dew of My blood, and My hair steeped in blood from the nocturnal pricking of the thorns:

For my head is full of dew, and my locks of the drops of the night.

The soul would willingly obey, but her lassitude makes her desire a little repose; which makes her say:

I have put off my garment, how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet, how shall I defile them?

Most sweet Jesus, in spite of this resistance. You cease not still to be instant upon entering, and as with the hand of a stronger inspiration. He seems to desire Himself to take away, without co-operation, the bolt of the sensible part which forms an impediment to Him, and to enter by the keyhole of the heart:

My beloved put his hand through the keyhole.

At this mighty calling the soul is stirred:

And my bowels were moved at his touch.

And resolves that she must open to her Beloved and begin meditation anew:

I arose up to open to my beloved:

But on the other hand, she feels such great sorrow for not having opened at the first knock, that she overturns the vase of myrrh, that is, she fills herself full of penitence, pouring out her tears over the very bolt, that is, making her sorrow reach as far as to the sensible part:

My hands dropped with myrrh, and my fingers were full of the choicest myrrh.

By means of this sorrow it happens that although the soul, in spite of the corporal and sensible part, opens to her Lord:

I opened the bolt of my door to my beloved:

Still, on account of this repugnance, she finds so little relish in prayer, that she thinks God is not with her:

But he had turned aside, and was gone.

Whence, remembering that she had been so earnestly called, and been so slothful, she is broken-hearted and consumed with sorrow:

My soul melted when he spoke:

She tries to find relish in the first degree of contemplation by means of sensible things; but her trouble does not permit her to find any there:

I sought him, and found him not: I called, and he did not answer me.

She passes to the second degree of spiritual and angelic things:

The keepers that go about the city found me:

But when she compares their promptness with her sluggishness, she remains transpierced with sorrow:

They struck me: and wounded me:

What is worst, if she enters into the third degree, and considers herself in her relation to God, she excites the same resistance which is displeasing her in herself, and it seems to her that her face is too ugly in comparison with that of the angels, and that they as it were take from her all her lustre:

The keepers of the walls took away my mantle from me.

So that wherever she is she finds great difficulties excited by this fourth impediment of corporal labours.

Remedy for the Fourth Impediment: Spiritual Conferences and Conversations

Vocal prayer or rather spiritual desires serve as remedies for the tedium of labour. So one sees that he who by illness has lost relish and appetite, changing his meat recovers them, and that in contemplative congregations, spiritual colloquies are intermingled with prayers. The soul then, disgusted by the labour of prayer, should address herself to spiritual persons and beg them to help her to find her Beloved:

I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him that I languish with love (for Him).

And they, knowing her needs, will draw her on to describe the qualities of the Beloved:

What manner of one is thy beloved of the beloved, thou most beautiful among women? What manner of one is thy beloved of the beloved, that thou hast so adjured us?

Then she proposes Jesus 'Christ so exactly according to nature, that it is not possible to represent Him better. He is God, the brightness of the same light, but made man in order to be able to buy us back by the purple of His blood:

My beloved is white and ruddy, chosen out of thousands:

And as man He is so singular that He can be recognised among a thousand:

Chosen out of thousands.

Because charity, the chief of virtues, may be said to be of gold in Him, that is, precious:

His head is as the finest gold;

And the graces and benefits which like innumerable tresses grow from it are the first fruits of palm-trees: and black as ravens: they are the effects of the victory which He gained on the tree of the cross, as worthy of admiration as black is in a horse:

His locks as branches of palm trees black as a raven.

He is like a white dove, which has in itself all the gifts of the Holy Spirit represented by the eyes:

His eyes as doves upon brooks of water, which are washed in milk,

The Holy Spirit, called in another sense a river, not by measure but with all plenitude, is given to her:

And sit beside the plentiful streams.

Wherefore, if you contemplate these examples, like cheeks full of striking beauty in the sight of all, odorous as vases full of aromatic perfumes, they will make themselves smelt on every side:

His cheeks are as beds of aromatical spices set by the perfumers.

His doctrine seems to be precious myrrh, like lilies from His holy lips:

His lips are as lilies, dropping choice myrrh.

His miracles are such that from His hands hyacinths seem to flow and fall abundantly.

His hands are golden rings full of hyacinths.

In everything, whether interior or exterior, this Beloved is admirable: His heart is of ivory enriched with precious stones. His deliberations are simple but prudent:

His belly as of ivory, set with sapphires.

His executions are full of strength but having discretion:

His legs as pillars of marble, that are set upon bases of gold.

and to finish here, He is all most dear, He is all most lovely:

His form as of Libanus, excellent as the cedars.

Fourth Degree: Consideration of Our God in Himself but as Man

Whilst the soul discourses of God in His humanity, sweetness returns to it, and it is forced to cry out: Ah!

His throat most sweet, and he is all lovely: such is my beloved, and he is my friend, ye daughters of Jerusalem.

And if the persons she is with would persist and say to her:

Whither is thy beloved gone, thou most beautiful among women? Whither is thy beloved turned aside, and we will seek him with thee?

She will no longer listen to them: but recognising that although her troubles had made her think that her Beloved

had withdrawn far from her, yet still He had not gone, but on the contrary had always stayed with her as in His garden, or as in a cabinet of perfumes; and drawing from this the greatest occasion of merit, she can say that He has culled from her most sweet smelling lilies:

My beloved is gone down into his garden, to the bed of aromatical spices, to feed in the gardens, and to gather lilies.

And on this account, since she knows that He has been always with her and is still so at present, she says:

I to my beloved, and my beloved to me, who feedeth among the lilies.

She has no further need of anything save to converse with Him, saying: Lord! when shall I please You by my beauty, sweetness, grace, strength, innocence, devotion and discretion? when will You say to me:

Thou art beautiful, my love, sweet and comely as Jerusalem: terrible as an army set in array.

Already, Lord, You have shown me, by a thousand signs that my glances have wounded You, that is, that my intentions are not displeasing to You:

Turn away thy eyes from me, for they have made me go out of myself.

That my hair, that is, my desire, is pure and simple:

Thy hair is as a flock of goats, that appear from Galaad.

That my senses, as flocks, have been carefully guarded:

Thy teeth as a flock of sheep, which come up from the washing, all with twins, and there is none barren among them.

And that the powers of my concupiscible part, desiring good and fleeing evil without dissimulation, like two rose-tinctured cheeks are dear and agreeable to you:

Thy cheeks are as the bark of a pomegranate, besides what is hidden within thee.

But, God, says the soul. You have already praised me for almost all these parts; I should now desire to make progress, and to surpass in devotion many other souls who are devout or who think they are so, and to make You able to say to me:

There are three-score queens, and four-score concubines, and young maidens without number. One is my dove.

What shall I say? - perhaps my desires aspire too high! - but I would desire that You should be able to say to me - "my perfect one"!

My perfect one is but one.

I would have in my nature, which is my mother, some rarity, and that it should be said of me:

She is the only one of her mother, the chosen of her that bore her.

And further, I would have one able to say:

The daughters saw her, and declared her most blessed: the queens and concubines, and they praised her.

For her innocence while her origin is in the night of sin:

Who is she that cometh forth (in devotion) like the morning rising, fair as the moon (with prudence and good election), bright as the sun, (and finally in her invincible force) terrible as an army set in array?

But besides this the soul adds: Where have You been, my Lord? It seemed to me that You had left me, when trouble and fatigue permitted me to feel no satisfaction. I have been, says He, in thee who art My garden, and I have been there with more profit to thee than I should have been if from the beginning I had given thee sweetness, furnishing thee an occasion of merit, whence I have drawn from My garden a greater fruit of merit:

I went down into the garden of nuts, to see the fruits of the valleys, and to look if the vineyard had flourished, and the pomegranates budded.

Blessed then be You, Lord, answers the soul, because in this way making me believe You were absent. You have given me an occasion of merit, and have made me make more way in a short time than by the coaches of princes: and because I knew not that You were with me, I can say:

I knew not: my soul troubled me for the chariots of Aminadab.

Discourse V

Fifth Hindrance: Human Respect

When a person attains some rare and unusual manner of life, not only does every one praise him, but it seems that every one desires to see him, and cries after the soul:

Return, return, Sulamitess: return, return that we may behold thee.

And it is not enough that the spiritual person depreciates what is in herself:

What shalt thou see in the Sulamitess but the companies of camps?

For in spite of this, those who see her praise her for her feet and way of walking, that is, for the obedience with which they see that this soul keeps the commandments of God:

How beautiful are thy steps in shoes, prince's daughter!

For her spiritual chastity, which makes one acknowledge that God is co-operating with her:

The joints of thy thighs are like jewels that are made by the hand of a skillful workman.

For a rich poverty which never has need of anything:

Thy navel is like a round bowl never wanting cups.

For fastings, which, filling the belly with peace, only crown the soul with fair and rich lilies:

Thy belly is like a heap of wheat, set about with lilies.

For the study of the two Testaments:

Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins.

For fortitude:

Thy neck as a tower of ivory.

For prudence:

Thy eyes like the fish-ponds in Hesebon, which are in the gate of the daughter of the multitude.

For precise justice:

Thy nose is as the tower of Libanus, that looketh towards Damascus.

For the mastering of the affections; and for conformity with the will of God which is known by the channels of revelation:

Thy head is like Carmel: and the hairs of thy head as royal purple not yet taken out of the dye.

In short, this soul is the subject of all tongues, which say to her, praising:

How beautiful art thou, and how comely, my dearest, in delights!

And she, increasing evermore in charity, and bearing fruit amidst her neighbours, is like the palm and the vine:

Thy stature is like to a palm tree, and thy breasts to clusters of grapes.

They who are in any necessity, whether of spirit or of body, say:

I said: I will go up into the palm tree, and will take hold of the fruit thereof: and thy breasts shall be as the clusters of the vine:

And on account of her good example, they say to her:

And the odour of thy mouth like apples.

For her good words - Ah! they say:

Thy throat like the best wine, worthy for my beloved to drink, and for his lips and his teeth to ruminate.

In a word, all this causes great disquietude to the devout soul.

Remedy for the Fifth Hindrance: Solitude

Oh! how good it is to retire into solitude! Wherefore the soul can say:

I to my beloved, and his turning is towards me. Come, my beloved, let us go forth into the field, let us abide in the villages.

Now the fruits of solitude are four: first, we waken up better to the examination of our conscience:

Let us get up early to the vineyards, let us see if the vineyard flourish, if the flowers be ready to bring forth fruits, if the pomegranates flourish:

Secondly, we then make a more entire resignation of the concupiscible faculty and its desires:

There I will give thee my breasts.

Thirdly, devotion grows:

The mandrakes give a smell.

Fourthly, we then offer more humbly to God our little merits, past and present:

In our gates are all fruits: the new and the old, my beloved, I have kept for thee.

Fifth Degree: The Consideration of God in Himself and as God

But amongst the fruits of solitude, this is eminent, that one can therein more easily consider God as God; which makes the spouse use those two words, "alone," "without," that is, apart from all creatures:

Who shall give thee to me for my brother, sucking the breasts of my mother, that I may find thee without (quite alone),

A consideration which makes men holily foolish, makes them dance before the Ark: whence it happens that until the soul has arrived at the affection of contempt of self, it ever has some shame; and this is why it desires solitude:

And kiss thee, and now no man may despise me?

A consideration which is a pledge of the enjoyment of heaven, whence the soul seems to itself to be there already:

I will take hold of thee,

I shall see Thee face to face, God! when we shall be in the true house and in the true chamber of human nature, that is, in heaven:

And bring thee into my mother's house:

Then I shall see all that belongs to my happiness, as in a mirror:

There thou shalt teach me,

And when Thou shalt have drawn from me, for my felicity, the wine of the grape and the must of pomegranates - glory essential and accidental:

And I will give thee a cup of spiced wine and new wine of my pomegranates.

Then shall the sweetness come, then the ecstasies, then the sleep of the powers; so that the sacred Spouse begs for pillows to sleep upon:

His left hand under my head, and his right hand shall embrace me.

The Beloved for His part tries to secure that she shall not be awakened:

I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, that you stir not up, nor awake my love, till she please.

Discourse VI

The Soul, Having Surmounted All Impediments, Has No Longee Need of Remedies, But Remains United to God and Absorbed in Him by A Perfect Devotion

At last the soul has arrived at so great a perfection of devotion, that no pleasure of the world moves her, no appearance seduces her, no praise weakens her, no labour terrifies her, no human respect restrains her: but in sight of the whole world she freely displays her love for her Spouse, and dances before the Ark, not troubling herself when the wisdom of the world, after having said to her:

Who is this that cometh up from the desert, flowing with delights?

Also follows her to rebuke her, because she is:

Leaning upon her beloved.

On the contrary, she ever talks with her Beloved of the great sign of love He gives in the very place where He had been the most offended, and when He resolved to die for us after Adam and Eve had disobeyed Him:

Under the apple tree I raised thee up: there thy mother was corrupted, there she was deflowered that bore thee.

The soul will no longer find any difficulty in labours; for nothing is difficult to the love which she holds deeply graven on her heart, and even in exterior actions:

Put me as a seal upon thy heart, as a seal upon thy arm,

So that love combats death:

Love is strong as death,

Hell cannot daunt it:

Jealousy as hard as hell,

Flames and fires are frozen in comparison with her love:

The lamps thereof are fire and flames.

The sea could not extinguish it:

Many waters cannot quench charity, neither can the floods drown it:

Nothing is comparable to it:

If a man should give all the substance of his house for love, he shall despise it as nothing.

As to the praises which are given her, the soul troubles not herself with them, because she says within herself: What are these imperfect souls, who having no good of their own would deck themselves out with external adornments? My little sisters, that is, imperfect souls, should think of this; for they have no breasts of themselves, no virtues or merits of their own:

Our sister is little, and hath no breasts. What shall we do to our sister in the day when she is to be spoken to?

In them one can supply the defect with praises, just as if one covered with silver a broken and dilapidated wall, with cedar a door which had rotted:

If she be a wall, let us build upon it bulwarks of silver: if she be a door, let us join it together with boards of cedar.

But I, happy I, says the soul, concern myself very little with pleasing men, my Beloved having made me as a wall and as a tower of such kind, that I am very pleasing and agreeable:

I am a wall: and my breasts are as a tower since I am become in his presence as one finding peace.

Then come sensible and temporal things, against which the soul perfect in mental prayer has taken such a disposition, that considering them as vile and of low price in comparison with her rich object, she only thinks of them in so far as they can modestly serve her necessities. For the rest, no care of herself can turn her aside. Little, says the soul, is necessary to one who seeks to live in the peace of Our Lord and with moderation. A thousand pieces of silver, or some other great price, is a thing of too little value:

The peaceable had a vineyard, in that which hath poplars: he let out the same to keepers, every man bringeth for the fruit thereof a thousand pieces of silver.

But I, says the soul, I have no need of so many things:

My vineyard before me is thy thousand peaceful ones.

On the contrary I will further give two hundred as alms to these poor, who by their prayers guard for us our goods:

And two hundred for them that keep the fruit thereof.

And indeed, being abstracted from all sensible things, I would have not one of them able to distract me or to trouble me.

And finally, if we would pass to worldly pleasures - I know, says the soul, that my Beloved will not endure rivals, and that with the consolations He gives me, He will not have me mingle the consolations which other than He could give me: and thus He commands me that rising up, and resigning myself totally to Him with a clear and open protestation, I renounce all other lovers:

Thou that dwellest in the gardens, the friends hearken:
make me hear thy voice.

And at once here am I, ready to obey Him. No longer the world or its pleasures, no longer any mortal thing, God, my God! Thou alone art my Well-Beloved. Thou alone art all my good: it is Thou alone whom I seek:

Fly (that is, come, but come lightly) my beloved, and be like to the roe, and to the young hart upon the mountains of aromatical spices.

In which last protestation and perfect resignation of the soul into and unto God consists the end of mental prayer, and the highest degree of spirituality, which is this close union of the soul with God by devotion.

And, to conclude, there remains no more to do except to pray Our Lord to deign by His mercy to draw us to Him by these degrees of mental prayer, so that being already united with Him in this world by grace, we may be so also by devotion; in order that after our death we may be so by glory, and that in all these holy unions He may kiss us, this divine Beloved, with a kiss of His sacred mouth. Amen.

About This EBook

The text of this ebook is taken from the book *The Mystical Explanation of the Canticle of Canticles*, by Saint Francis de Sales. The original version used was published in 1643; the English version presented here was translated from the French by Father Henry Benedict Mackey, D.D., O.S.B. and published by Benziger Brothers in 1908. It has the Imprimatur of Bishop William Anthony Johnson, Vicar-General, Archdiocese of Westminster, England, 6 January 1908.

The cover image is a detail of a fresco of a lily among thorns, a symbol of the Virgin Mary as described in the Canticle. It is in the church of Santa Caterina del Sasso, Varese, Italy; date and artist unknown. It was photographed on 1 August 2010 by Wolfgang Sauber, and the image swiped from [Wikimedia Commons](#).

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